

**Holder to Facilitate the Signing and Storage of Collectible
Baseballs and Other Sports Memorabilia**

Technical Field of the Invention:

5 This invention relates to collectible memorabilia holders, and more particularly to an apparatus, and method of use thereof, for holding a baseball or other sports memorabilia article in such a way as to facilitate its signing for autographs and/or later storage.

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Background Art:

 Since the dawn of professional sports, it has been common among sports fans, athletes, and others to display sports memorabilia, such as autographed baseballs. While it is of course
15 possible to have players autograph baseballs at sports memorabilia stores, or other locations, a significant number of autograph signings occur at the baseball field prior to a game's start, when players practice and interact with the fans. Nevertheless, this informal and impromptu signing procedure presents a number of
20 problems to both the signing player and the fan.

 First, as the player usually does not return to the field from practice but is likely to sign the balls before leaving, he will likely still have on equipment like batting gloves or mitts, which become dirty through game play and which are themselves
25 cumbersome to have to hold on to while also signing a baseball. Additionally, the sweat from a player's hands after a vigorous practice can itself damage the baseball, either by dirtying the

surface of an unsigned ball or smearing other signatures on a baseball signed by more than one player. Such scuffing and dirtying of the baseball is of course highly deleterious to its aesthetic and monetary or collectible value. It would therefore
5 be desirable for a fan or baseball collector desiring to have a signed baseball clean from dirt and other field debris to provide the player with a ball which is at least partly clean of such dirt or debris.

Next, as stated previously, the signing player is signing a
10 baseball standing on the field of play while carrying his mitt. Oftentimes the player will be straining for any type of leverage against which he can more easily grip or sign the ball. Many players who would be agreeable to signing a baseball might nevertheless choose not to do so because of these practical
15 obstacles in physically signing the ball. It would therefore be desirable for both a fan or baseball collector and a signing player to provide that player with some form of leverage to assist the player in physically signing the ball while standing.

Finally, many times a player who would be willing to sign a
20 baseball is stymied in his attempt because he does not have a pen. Given the short amount of time a player has between the end of practice and having to depart the field, waiting for a fan to produce a pen is not something a player wishes to do. Also, many times a casual fan does not possess a pen but would still like to
25 have a genuine autographed baseball. It would therefore be desirable for both a fan or baseball collector and a signing player to provide that player with simultaneously with both a

baseball to be signed and a pen for the player to use in one convenient package.

A survey of the prior art reveals many devices useful for storing and displaying signed sports memorabilia, which are advantageous to the fan or collector by preventing a viewer from
5 directly handling the memorabilia and thereby damaging the piece, and by protecting the piece from environmental degradation. Thus, United States Patent 6,016,910 to Rodearmel describes and claims a device for displaying sports memorabilia having a base member and
10 a memorabilia holder extending outwardly from a display surface of the base member. A music box may also be mounted to the base member, and at least one of the base member, holder or music box comprises indicia such as shapes, decorations, and sounds related to the sport of the memorabilia to provide an enhanced sensory
15 experience for the viewer. Additionally, United States Patent 5,379,892 to Reams, et al., describes and claims a protective display case for collectible items such as baseballs and other collectible items, comprising a rigid transparent tube which contains the baseballs and through which they can be viewed; one
20 end cap at each end of the transparent tube to retain the balls; and a rigid backboard to which the end caps are attached for the purpose of holding the end caps in their fixed rigid position. However, while each of these devices indeed helps protect and display the signed baseballs, none of these in any manner
25 facilitates the initial signing of the baseball.

Objects of the Invention and Industrial Applicability:

Accordingly, it is a general object of the present invention to provide an apparatus, and method of use thereof, to aid in the signing and protection of baseballs and other sports memorabilia articles while on the field of play.

It is an object of the present invention to provide an apparatus, and method of use thereof, to aid in the signing and protection of baseballs and other sports memorabilia articles whereby the baseball is protected from being dirtied by the signing player's hands, equipment, or other debris or material while on the field of play.

It is a further object of the present invention to provide an apparatus, and method of use thereof, to aid in the signing and protection of baseballs and other sports memorabilia articles whereby the device provides the player with some form of leverage to assist the player in physically signing the ball while standing on the field of play.

It is a still further object of the present invention to provide an apparatus, and method of use thereof, to aid in the signing and protection of baseballs and other sports memorabilia articles whereby the player is simultaneously provided on the field of play with both a baseball to be signed and a pen for the player to use in one convenient package.

Summary of the Invention:

Consequently, to achieve these and other aims and objectives, the present invention provides for an apparatus, and method of use

thereof, to assist in the signing and protection of a baseball or other similar sports memorabilia article while on the field of play. The apparatus is to be constructed of plastic, although other durable material may be used. The apparatus consists of a top and bottom end configured as flat discs, or alternatively as a flat top end and an asymmetrically-curved bottom end, these ends linked by a central portion. The main body of the apparatus is hollow from the top end through the central portion continuing into the bottom end, providing holes of a circumference large enough to accept a baseball or other similar sports memorabilia article. Means for attaching or holding a writing implement is provided on the main body of the apparatus through a hole formed from a flange extending outwardly from the central portion of the apparatus, alternatively from holes drilled through the top and bottom ends, or from a hole drilled through the top end with a holder affixed to or molded from the material forming the bottom end. The central portion of the main body of the apparatus may be contoured and tapered to facilitate gripping of the apparatus while a player is signing the article, and in an alternative embodiment, the bottom end of the apparatus has concave flanges to further facilitate such gripping. In a second alternative embodiment, the apparatus may be constructed in a two-piece, interlocking design to permit multiple uses. The apparatus may also bear lettering or logos for advertising, identification, or other informational uses on the top or bottom ends or on the central portion.

Brief Description of the Drawings:

FIGURES 1 and 2 show a front and top view, respectively, of one embodiment of the apparatus with a baseball inserted therein.

FIGURES 3, 4, and 5 show a front, cross-sectional, and front perspective view, respectively, of an alternative embodiment of the apparatus with a baseball inserted therein, this embodiment having concave flanges on the central portion of the main body of the apparatus.

FIGURES 6 and 7 show a front and side view, respectively, of a second alternative embodiment of the apparatus with a baseball inserted therein, this embodiment having a concave flange on the bottom end of the main body of the apparatus.

FIGURES 8, 9, and 10 show a top, side, and cross-sectional view, respectively, of an alternative embodiment of the apparatus wherein holes have been drilled through the top and bottom ends, and through the central portion of the main body, to accept the writing implement.

FIGURES 11 and 12 show a side and top view, respectively, of an alternative embodiment of the apparatus wherein the flat top end of the main body of the apparatus is proportionately larger than the asymmetrically-curved bottom end.

FIGURE 13 shows an exploded cross-sectional view of an alternative embodiment of the apparatus, wherein the main body of the apparatus is constructed out of two interlocking pieces.

FIGURE 14 shows a cross-sectional view of an alternative embodiment of the apparatus, wherein the two interlocking pieces of the main body of the apparatus have been united.

FIGURES 15 and 16 show a front perspective and cross-sectional close-up view, respectively, of the apparatus embodied in FIGURES 11 and 12, now in a two-piece design bearing a tongue-and-groove locking system.

5 FIGURE 17 shows a side view of an alternative embodiment of the apparatus with a baseball inserted therein, this embodiment bearing lettering on the central portion of the main body of the apparatus.

10 Detailed Description of the Invention:

There is depicted in FIGURE 1 an apparatus 1 to be used to aid in the signing and protection of a baseball 6 or other sports memorabilia article while on the field of play. The apparatus 1 is preferably to be constructed from plastic; however, any other
15 type of durable material may be used. The main body of the apparatus 1 consists of a central portion 2 from which two flanges 3 project outwardly laterally. The central portion 2 is hollowed out at ends 2a to form a space to accept a baseball 6 or other appropriately sized sports memorabilia article. The apparatus 1
20 has top and bottom ends 4 which extend the entire length of the central portion 2 and the lateral flanges 3. The top and bottom ends 4 each bear a slight lip 4c. As a baseball 6 under Major League Baseball rules can have a circumference of no less than 9 inches (") and no greater than 9.25", the hollowed-out space in
25 the central portion 2 must measure no greater or lesser than these dimensions, and also the top and bottom ends 4 and 4a are to have a greater circumference than these dimensions in order to best

carry out the objectives of the present invention. Additionally, while the hollowed-out space in the central portion 2 may be completely flush with the baseball 6 or other articles in some embodiments, other embodiments may be sized to permit slight rotation of the article enveloped therein, which allows for an autographing player to spin the ball to find the best surface on which to sign. Finally, in this general embodiment of the invention, a hole 5 is to be provided in one of the lateral flanges 3 to accept a writing implement such as a pen (undepicted).

As seen in FIGURE 2, the top end 4 of the apparatus 1 has a circumference significantly greater than that of the inserted baseball 6. The ends 2a of the central portion 2 wrap snugly around the baseball 6 to keep the ball in place. The outer edge 8 of the top end 4 is to be circularly shaped so as to facilitate a player's gripping the baseball 6. It is evident in this figure that a pen 7 has been inserted into the hole 5 illustrated in FIGURE 1 to provide the autographing player with a writing implement on the field of play.

An alternative embodiment of the apparatus 1 is depicted in FIGURES 3, 4, and 5. In this embodiment, the lateral flanges 3 of the apparatus 1 are tapered concavely at their outer edges 9 in order to better fit into the autographing player's palm, thereby further strengthening his grip as he signs the baseball 6. As seen in FIGURE 2, the ends 2a of the central portion 2 wrap snugly around the baseball 6 to keep the ball in place. Additionally in this embodiment, it is to be noted that the bottom end 4a of the

apparatus is to remain parallel with the top end 4 along their entire length.

In FIGURES 6 and 7, an alternative embodiment of the apparatus 1 is illustrated. In this embodiment, the bottom end 4b of the apparatus 1 is tapered concavely inwardly towards the top end 4 to define two bottom flanges 10 projecting outwardly downwardly from each lateral flange 3. Along with the concavely-tapered edges 9 of the lateral flanges 3, the bottom flanges 10 of the apparatus 1 provide even further strengthening of an autographing player's grip as he signs a baseball 6 by supplying additional surface area for his palm to fit into. FIGURE 5 further illustrates a writing implement 7, such as a pen, inserted into a holding space 7a formed by the hole 5 in the lateral flange 3. The total height of the apparatus 1 even with the tapered bottom end 4b should remain the same as in embodiments with straight bottom ends.

In FIGURES 8, 9, and 10, an alternative embodiment of the apparatus is illustrated wherein the hole 5 to accept the pen 7 has been drilled through both the top and bottom ends 4 and the central portion 2 of the apparatus 1. As seen in FIGURE 10, a chamber 5a is formed by such drilling into which the pen 7 or other writing implement is inserted.

An additional embodiment of the invention is depicted in FIGURES 11 and 12. In this embodiment, the top end 4 of the main body of the apparatus 1 is proportionately longer than the corresponding bottom end. The top end 4 bears a flange 15 to provide further leverage for the signing player's gripping

fingers. Also the lip 4c of both the top end 4 and the bottom end 4a flare outwardly at an angle to the flat upper surface of each end. The bottom end 4a of the main body of the apparatus 1 is asymmetrically concavely curved, flattening out to become parallel with the top end 4. At the end underneath the flange 15 on the top end 4, an additional flange 16 is provided to give further leverage to the autographing player while signing the article of sports memorabilia 6. Parallel to the hole 5 in the top end 4 of the main body of the apparatus 1, a cylindrical holder 17 to accept a writing implement 7 arises upwardly towards the top end 4. This holder 17 may be formed directly from the material forming the body of the bottom end 4a, or otherwise affixed to this material. Also, the holder 17 may be at a slight angle to the top end 4, rather than rising perpendicularly upwardly. As evident in FIGURE 11, the top end 4 of the main body of the apparatus 1 projects laterally outwardly from the hole 5 accepting the writing implement 7 a distance greater than the distance of the bottom end 4a projecting laterally outwardly from the edge of the holder 17. Also, only the upper portion of the baseball 6 or other article of sports collectible memorabilia is visible, projecting outwardly from the top end 4. In an undepicted embodiment, however, the baseball 6 may project slightly from the bottom end, and in yet another undepicted embodiment, one edge of the top end 4 may be slightly beveled to allow the apparatus to stand on this end for display purposes.

A two-piece alternative embodiment of the apparatus 1 is depicted in FIGURES 13 and 14. The shape of this two-piece

embodiment can assume the shape of any of the embodiments previously described; in these illustrations, the embodiment from FIGURES 3 and 4 has been used. Each piece 1b of the apparatus 1 is formed at the splitting along the horizontal equator 12 of the apparatus 1 at the midpoint of its height, thereby forming two symmetric pieces 1b. Where the embodiment utilizing two bottom flanges 10 is to be used, the apparatus 1 is still to be split along the equator 12 of the apparatus 1 at the midpoint of its height. Each piece 1b bears a depression 5b at the equatorial edge 12 which, when the pieces are united, will form the hole 5 through which a writing implement may be inserted. Arising from the equatorial edge 12, one or a plurality of locking flanges 11 each bearing a locking arm 13a project upwardly. The locking flange 11 and locking arm 13a of one piece 1b are to be fitted into complementary spaces 11a and 13b in the other piece. The two pieces 1b may be locked into place by turning them clockwise to affixing the locking arms 13a tightly into place in the locking arm space 13b.

The main advantage of the two-piece design depicted in FIGURES 13 and 14 over a uniform or molded design is twofold: the two-piece design permits the apparatus 1 to be reused with more than one desired piece of memorabilia, and also the apparatus 1 may be removed to permit the collector to store or view the piece of memorabilia in more conventional means. The uniform or molded design is instead contemplated to be permanently molded onto a piece of memorabilia.

The two-piece embodiment may also bear a simple tongue-and-groove design, without locks, as illustrated in FIGURES 15 and 16. In this embodiment, a tongue 18, projecting outwardly downwardly from the inner edge of one piece 1b of the main body of the body of the apparatus 1, is to be inserted into a complementary groove 19 placed along the inner edge of the second piece 1b' of the main body of the apparatus 1. A corresponding tongue 18' and groove 19' are also on the second piece 1b'. While not as strong as the interlocking design depicted in FIGURES 10 and 11, this form is less expensive to manufacture and is easier to use by older collectors, who may lack the strength or dexterity to grip and rotate the pieces while locking the apparatus around the article of sports memorabilia.

Turning finally to FIGURE 17, the apparatus 1 may also bear graphical information like lettering 14 or logos for advertising, identification, or other informational uses on the central portion 2 or on the top 4 or bottom 4a ends (not pictured). Such graphical information may be printed, etched, embossed from the molded plastic of the apparatus 1, or by any other means known to practitioners in the art.

The apparatus 1 described herein was designed and manufactured to fit a baseball 6 of Major League Baseball specifications. However, it is contemplated that other types of balls from such different sports as tennis, cricket, hurling, lacrosse, handball, and softball, and other pieces of sports equipment such as hockey pucks are also capable of being signed and fitted into the apparatus 1 in this manner. Furthermore,

while an exemplary design has been expressed herein, others practiced in the art may be aware of other designs which may be used to lock the two-piece design into place, and so on. Thus, while the present invention has been described in connection with
5 exemplary embodiments thereof, it will be understood that many modifications in both design and use will be apparent to those of ordinary skill in the art, and this application is intended to cover any adaptations or variations thereof. It is therefore manifestly intended that this invention be limited only by the
10 claims and the equivalents thereof.